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SUBJECT: (C) NEA DAS DAVID HALE DISCUSSES LEBANON WITH THE VATICAN

CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, Pol Chief.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) The Holy See shares the USG goal of a peaceful, free and sovereign Lebanon. The Vatican advocates a cautious approach that focuses on consensus and restraint to achieve this goal. The Vatican's point person for Lebanon urged the U.S. and the West to support March 14, but to discourage "unrealistic" expectations that they can defeat Hezbollah. He said the division of the Christian electorate gives the Shia an incentive to invest in the democratic process, and advocated dialogue with all regional countries to extend the current calm beyond next spring's election. End summary.

Prudence and engagement

2. (C) NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale met with Monsignor Coppola on December 2 at the Vatican, accompanied by Embassy Vatican DCM and polchief. Ambassador Hale briefed Coppola on USG goals for Lebanon. Coppola confirmed the Vatican shares these goals, while advocating prudence and engagement as the way forward. He said the transition to a new Administration in the U.S. and upcoming elections in Lebanon, Israel, and Iran contribute to the current "wait-and-see" calm in the country.

3. (C) Coppola stated that pushing March 14 to be more assertive now would be a mistake: Hezbollah is strong and seen by half of Lebanon's population as the guarantor of their security. This is unfortunate, but a reality. While Hezbollah is like a bomb that can explode at any time, its "detonator" is outside Lebanon. It is therefore important to engage countries like Iran and Syria and to give their totalitarian regimes face-saving opportunities to change their behavior and to regain normal standing in the international community.

4. (C) Coppola said that March 14 contains extreme elements, so it is better to support specific moderate March 14 members rather than the group as a whole. This would facilitate necessary cooperation between the majority and the opposition after the elections, regardless of the results. Consensus, not majority rule, is the way to ensure peace in Lebanon. The search for consensus is less likely to lead to deadlock if the U.S. and the West are willing to engage neighboring countries to address other problems in the region.

5. (C) Muslims are strongly committed to political parties affiliated with their religious sects, Coppola continued, while Christians' are divided. This weakens Christian influence. On the other hand, it gives the Shia an incentive not to abandon the democratic process, because it allows for Shia-Christian alliances. These alliances are necessary to win an election but would not be possible if Christians voted as a block for March 14.

6. (C) Comment: Coppola often uses meetings with visiting USG officials to lobby for the Holy See's principled position of

advocating dialogue, even with totalitarian regimes or violent organizations. His reading of the complexities of Lebanese and regional politics reinforce this tendency. Because the Holy See tends to take a very long view of situations affecting Christians (or indeed any situation or group), it gives precedence to avoiding mistakes over accelerating change, even when it agrees with the USG --like in Lebanon-- that change is ultimately required and desirable. End comment.

GLENDON